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Eleven Characteristics of Effective Smaller Churches

By David R. Ray On April 13, 2016

Leading Ideas

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Some years ago, I traveled across the United States, west to east and north to south, and back north, visiting twenty-one smaller faith communities that were noted for the quality and faithfulness of their life together. I asked probing questions and listened carefully, looking for the common denominators, the faithful and exceptional qualities that were present in most or all of these congregations. I identified eleven prevailing qualities that characterized most, if not all, of the faith communities I visited.

“ A smaller church that applies itself to realizing these common denominators is sure to be a dynamic, faithful, and effective church that has no need to apologize and will be a vital organ in the Body of Christ.

I believe the following practices can help your congregation be more what God is calling you to be. Imagine and strategize how each could be manifested even more in your congregation.

1. **Prioritize worship.** In each place, worship was a priority, and they were working to make their worship richer and more vital. What can you do to strengthen your worship?
2. **Take advantage of your size.** None were embarrassed by their smaller size; rather, they were taking advantage of their size. How could you take advantage of your size?

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3. **Kindle a family spirit.** In each place, there was a strong family spirit and a close and caring community. How can your church take better care of one another and deepen the relationship among everyone?
4. **Have fun.** In these faith communities, the members really enjoyed one another and had great fun together. How can members be helped to enjoy one another even more and have more fun together?
5. **Commit to mission.** At most of the places I visited, there was a serious, passionate commitment to mission, addressing serious needs and issues beyond their church doors. What could you do to develop or expand a deeper commitment to mission and service where you are?
6. **Find your distinctive niche.** These congregations knew they couldn't be all things to all people, but they had found and defined their particular niche and were filling it. What is your distinctive niche, and how can you better fulfill it?
7. **Strengthen your pastor's leadership.** All those places had effective, trusted pastoral leaders (young and old, lay and ordained, part-time and full-time), and most had been in place for several years. What can you do to maximize the relationship with your pastor and, if possible, extend it?
8. **Deepen the effectiveness of laity.** In all these places, there was a committed core of laity. Knowing that every congregation is dependent on its membership, what can be done to take laity to a deeper level of faithfulness, purpose, and effectiveness?
9. **Deploy resources wisely.** I don't believe any of these congregations were wealthy, but they all knew how to generate enough money to do what they wanted and needed to do. How might your congregation do more with what it has and generate more resources?
10. **Thrive! Don't just survive.** All of these places were more concerned with being a living church than a surviving organization. What would move your congregation beyond merely a survival mentality to becoming a contagious, vibrant faith community?
11. **Nurture a passionate faith.** Last and most important, in each place there was real commitment to spiritual nurturing and faith development. What steps could your church take to help people, young and old, become more passionate about their faith?

A smaller church that applies itself to realizing these common denominators is sure to be a dynamic, faithful, and effective church that has no need to apologize and will be a vital organ in the Body of Christ.

This article is adapted from David Ray's book, Smaller Churches: Real Possibilities for Hard Times © David R. Ray, 2015, available at [Amazon](#) or directly from David at revdavidray@yahoo.com. It is used by permission.

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